Muhammad as a Messianic Figure: An Analysis of the Epigraph, the Song of Solomon, and the Theology of Pre-Islamic Himaryan Monotheism

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Abstract

The discovery of a number of inscriptions in the region of South Arabia, particularly in ancient Yemen (the kingdom of Himyar), containing the word *Mḥmd* or *b-Mḥmd*, has given rise to extensive discussion among Semitic epigraphers and theologians. Some see it as a form of *divine epilate*—i.e., "the Praiseworthy One"—that points to the Lord Raḥmānān; others interpret it as a personal name, or even a prophetic symbol of a figure to be looked forward to. Through a **philological-epigraphic approach, comparative theology**, and **an analysis of Semitic religious syncretism**, this article examines the possibility that the mention *of Mḥmd* in the Himyar inscription is a linguistic and theological representation of the figure who would later be known as **Muhammad**, a messianic figure anticipated by Yemen's monotheistic community. This article also places Song of Solomon 5:16 as a textual bridge between the Hebrew tradition and the Himyar prayer, which together glorify the "Praiseworthy One." Thus, the *phenomenon of Mḥmd* in Himyar is not only historical, but also prophetic—an echo of the revelation to come.

Keywords: Muhammad, Himyar, Rahmānān, Epigraphs of South Arabia, Song of Solomon 5:16, Semitic Messianism.

Introduction

In the heart of southern Yemen, long before the birth of Islam, stood the kingdom of Himyar (around the 2nd to 6th centuries AD). Along the way, the nation transformed from ancient polytheism into a unique **form of Semitic monotheism**, placing God in the name **of Raḥmānān**—"the Most Merciful." The spiritual transformation left a remarkable imprint in the stone inscriptions of the Musnad script, in which the name of God and personal prayers were engraved in solemn language.

One of the most evocative findings is the emergence of the word **Mḥmd**, both as part of prayer formulas and personal identity. Major scholars such as **Jacques Ryckmans**, **André Jamme**, **Christian Robin**, and **Robert Hoyland** noted the appearance of this term in several inscriptions such as **Ja 1028**,

Ry 574, and **CIH 420**. The question arises: does *Mḥmd* mean "the Praiseworthy One" as the attribute of God, the name of a man, or a marker of a figure to come?

On a broader horizon, the Semitic society of that time lived in the midst of the great currents of Jewish and Christian messianism. This is where the idea of *ha-Mashiach*—the Anointed One—resonates strongly, blending eschatological hope with religious politics. It is not an exaggeration to suspect that the term *Mḥmd* in the Himyar prayers may contain an echo of that hope: the hope of the presence of one who is praised, sanctified, and sent forth to establish the truth.

1. Himyar Religious Transformation and Raḥmānān Monotheism

1.1. From polytheism to monotheism

The Sabaean-Himyar people originally worshipped many gods: Almaqah, ʿAthtar, Wadd, and others. However, around the 4th century AD, King **Abīkarib Asʿad**—who according to Arabic sources is also known as Asʿad al-Kāmil—embraced Jewish beliefs. Since then, the royal inscriptions have changed drastically. All polytheistic symbols were replaced by one name of God: **Raḥmānān**, accompanied by the title "Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of Israel."

This change is not just theological; it is also political. Raḥmānān became a symbol of spiritual unity and the legitimacy of the king's power. Himyar monotheism became a kind of **meeting point between Yahwism, Eastern Christianity, and the local spirituality of South Arabia**. This was the theological foundation that would be the forerunner of *the understanding of tauḥīd* in the Arabian peninsula.

1.2. Raḥmānān prayer and invocation formula

The Himyar prayers carved into the stone almost always begin with the phrase **b-s¹m Raḥmānān** ("In the name of the Most Merciful"). This form shows a mature monotheistic consciousness and is a direct parallel to **bismillāh ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm**.
However, among the hundreds of inscriptions, there are some that contain astonishing additions:

b-s¹m Raḥmānān w-Mḥmd — "In the name of Raḥmānān and Mḥmd."

This formulation raises a big question: is *Mḥmd* another name for God, an epithet, or the name of a spiritual figure? This is where philology, theology, and history meet.

2. Philological Analysis: The Meaning and Function of "Mḥmd"

2.1. Semitic root ḥ-m-d

In all Semitic language families, **the root ḥ-m-d** means "to praise" or "to glorify." From the same root emerge the words:

- Hebrew: *maḥmad* (מחמד) – "the beautiful/the pleasant"
- Arabic: *maḥmūd* (محمود) – "the praiseworthy," and *muḥammad* (محمد) – "the highly praised."

Semantically, *Mḥmd* can mean attribute ("praiseworthy") or self-name. The fact that Himyar uses the Musnad script without vowels reinforces this ambiguity: *Mḥmd* can be read *Muḥammad*, *Maḥmūd*, or even *Maḥmad*—all rooted in the concept of "praise."

2.2. Epigraphic Evidence

The **Ja 1028 inscription** from Najrān contains the double formula *b-s¹m Raḥmānān w-Mḥmd*. Robin interprets the word as *a divine epithet*, while Hoyland sees the possibility that *Mḥmd* is a "human representation" of divine nature—a kind of intermediary or messenger. The **inscriptions CIH 420** and **Ry 574** mention *Mḥmd bn ḏt Ws¹ʿt*, clearly as **the name of a person**, indicating that the name "Muhammad" was known in South Arabia before Islam.

Thus, philologically, *Mḥmd* can serve **a dual function**: as a divine attribute and a personal name, similar to the way the word "Christ" means both "the Anointed One" and "Jesus Christ".

3. The Messianic Imagination in the Jewish and Christian Traditions of Himyar

3.1. Jewish Messianism in Yemen

The Jewish tradition that developed in Yemen carried the teachings of *ha-Mashiach*, the coming Messiah from the descendants of the Prophet David. In rabbinic commentaries, the Messiah was not merely a political liberator, but *a ha-Maḥmad*, a figure "praised by the nations." When King **Yūsuf Dhū Nuwās** (†525 A.D.) embraced the Jews, he saw himself as the king who protected the faith of Israel from Byzantine Christian intervention. Some of his inscriptions refer to *Raḥmānān* with an expression of eschatological hope—that divine help would come through "the praiseworthy."

3.2. Eastern Christian Resonance

Meanwhile, the Christian community of Najrān is familiar with the prophecy *of Paraklētos* (Comforter) from the Gospel of John. In the Syriac tradition, the word is often associated with the term **Aḥmad**, another form of the root *ḥ-m-d*. Therefore, both Yemeni Jews and Eastern Christians have a **commendable semantic** in their depiction of their savior figures. This suggests that *the term Mḥmd* can be understood as a linguistic and theological bridge between the two traditions.

4. Song of Solomon 5:16 and Semitic Messianic Resonance

The 16th verse of *the Song of Solomon* reads:

חִכּוֹ מַמְתַקִּים וְכֻלּוֹ מַחֲמַדִּים
זֶה דוֹדִי וְזֶה רֵעִי בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלִָם

ḥikkō mamtaqqīm we-kullō maḥamadīm; ze dōdī we-ze reʿī, benot Yerushalayim.

The literal translation:

"Her mouth is sweet; The whole of him is maḥamadīm (the praiseworthy)."

In Jewish mystical interpretations, the "beloved" in this verse is often interpreted as God himself, while *maḥamadīm* is understood as **a manifestation of divine beauty and glory**. The plural form (*-īm*) is seen as the honorific plural (*pluralis majestatis*), just like *Elohim*.

If we compare it with the prayer of Himyar *b-s¹m Raḥmānān w-Mḥmd*, then the two texts have structural and spiritual similarities: they juxtapose the Merciful God with the "Praiseworthy One." In the prophetic horizon, the term *maḥamadīm* can be read as a *linguistic prefiguration* of *Muḥammad*—a figure who manifests God's mercy and praise in the world.

Thus, *Song of Solomon 5:16* becomes **a symbolic link** between Hebrew mystical praise and Himyar monotheism, as well as opening up the possibility of a prophetic interpretation of the emergence of the "Praiseworthy One" in Arabia.

5. Muhammad as a Expected Figure

In comparative theology, *the phenomenon of Mḥmd* in Himyar can be understood as an **expression of prophetic waiting**. Just as Jews await the Messiah and Christians wait for the Paracletes, the monotheistic community of Yemen awaits the "Praiseworthy One" who will bring the final law of God.

If so, the *prayer b-s¹m Raḥmānān w-Mḥmd* is no longer just a liturgical formula, but an **eschatological declaration**: an acknowledgment of the Merciful God and longing for His messenger.In the Islamic perspective, it can be read as a spiritual echo of the Qur'anic prophecy: *"وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِن بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ"* — "I tell you that there will come after me a messenger named Ahmad." (QS Aṣ-Ṣaff 61:6).

Theologically, *Raḥmānān* and *Mḥmd* represent two sides of the divine relationship: **the Merciful** and the **Praiseworthy**—the Giver of Mercy and the recipient of Grace. The Himyar prayer may have unwittingly recited that relation centuries before Islam: *"In the name of the Most Merciful and (by) the Praiseworthy."*

6. Interpretive Discussion: Syncretism of Revelation and Prophetic Anticipation

This phenomenon shows that Islam was not born in a vacuum, but in a **continuum of Semitic revelation**. The monotheism of Raḥmānān in Himyar is the bridge that connects Hebrew divinity with Arabic spirituality.The word *Mḥmd* in the inscription is not direct archaeological evidence of the Prophet Muhammad, but rather a **linguistic reflection of the universal expectation** of the coming of the final messenger.

With that framework, the academic debate between "personal name" versus "divine epithet" can be synthesized: *Mḥmd* may have been originally an epithet, but gradually became a personal name—just as "Christ" became a personal name for Jesus.

7. Theological Conclusions and Implications

From the above philological, historical, and theological analysis, it can be concluded that:

1. **The term *Mḥmd* had been known in pre-Islamic South Arabia**, both as a name and an epittete, indicating a religious awareness of the concept of the "Praiseworthy One."
2. **The prayer of Himyar *b-s¹m Raḥmānān w-Mḥmd*** describes the relationship between the Loving God and the awaited praiseworthy figure, which in the theological context of Islam finds its meaning in the prophethood of Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم.
3. **Song of Solomon 5:16** provides the linguistic and symbolic basis for the messianic meaning of *the word ḥ-m-d*, showing that the praise of the "Praise" had been part of Semitic spirituality long before the 7th century.
4. This phenomenon demonstrates **the inner coherence between Judeo-Christian monotheism and Islam**, where revelation works not only through text, but also through ancient language, symbols, and prayers.

Finally, the name *Muhammad* not only marks a historical figure, but also the **spiritual archetype** of the "Praise" that the Semitic generations have been waiting for.
The simple prayer of the Himyar stone—*"In the name of Raḥmānān and the Praiseworthy"*—became a prophetic echo of the words that would later descend on the Hijaz:

"Bismillāh ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm."

A continuation of language and faith that stitches the past together with the final revelation.

Featured Bibliography

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